

OFSS May 10, 2015  
 “Struck By Love”  
 Barbara Pendergrast

*“This week, Barbara Pendergrast will lead us in a discussion, “Struck By Love,” as we talk about the transformative power of God’s love that mostly comes to us through imperfect glimpses of a transcendent perfection.” Cathedral Times*

Let us pray:

Gracious God, We give you thanks for this day and for your presence in it. We thank you for your deep love of us and for all of creation. Open our hearts to see you in all that surrounds us, and guide us to act in ways that foster love and wholeness in all that we encounter.

We thank you for the gift of this community, for the fact that we are able to meet and to worship and to speak freely, and mostly we thank you for the desire to know you more fully. Be with us this morning as we explore the nature of our seeking you and your seeking us

In the name of your Son, Jesus Christ, and through the power of the Holy Spirit, we ask our prayer.

Amen

Good Morning...

I haven’t been with you as much this semester as the last, and I’ve missed the connectivity of that. I haven’t even listened to all of the podcasts, though I did make the attempt on a five-hour drive to Charleston for Easter to hear all that I had missed, but a connective cable was involved, and...well...it didn’t happen. So, I’m sorry that I’m coming in with out a secure base of reference from our past classes.

I considered looking at Charles Taylor’s book, A Secular Age, the book that George chose for us to work around this semester, but it is 874 pages.

So, I went to plan B and thought about ordering James K.A. Smith’s book, on “Reading Charles Taylor.” It’s sort of a cliff note version that on Amazon is described as the “thin” version; not in content but in length. It is only 148 pages. The dilemma for me is that when I discovered all of this, it was Monday, and I had a busy week ahead.

So... I chose Plan C. I picked a topic I wanted to talk about.

I did ask George though, if this was OK, since I’m working on being more obedient to authority, and when I explained to him where I wanted to go with my topic, he said, “That’s great... that’s your Wheel House.”

Yes, I said, but the problem with going to my Wheel House is that sometimes I think I might be the only one in there.

My hope this morning is that I will not be describing the nature of a unique or solitary experience, but that you will find resonance from your own lives as we meander through the topic of, **“Looking and Longing for God.” or “Struck by Love.”**

As humans we seek meaning and belonging in many ways; “through intimate relationships, through work or entertainment. Some of us may have or perhaps still do, seek it through chemicals” (Gerald May, Will and Spirit, p.70), and, many of us because we have a faith tradition, also seek it through religion. My **premise today is that no matter what we turn to in order to make meaning and seek purpose for our lives, at its deepest root, all of our longing, is a longing for God.** This longing often manifests itself in experiences which we might call Holy Encounters, or Sacred Moments, or Mountaintop Experiences, in which we are given a sense of union with God, that transforms us in some way and satisfies us with a sense of meaning and purpose, if only momentarily, in the grand scheme of things. Mostly, these experiences come to us through imperfect glimpses, small and large insights, that ultimately leave us with a mere echo of an

experience of God that cannot be finally satisfied by anything other than final union with God.

The term for the kind of experience that I'm speaking of is referred to as a **“unitive experience” or a transcendent experience. So, let's talk a little bit about what is it and what the characteristics are of this kind of experience.**

A unitive experience is an experience that takes us beyond or outside ourselves in a way that transforms or converts us somehow. It is an experience in which we might feel a oneness with things, or a deep sense of peace in our body, mind or spirit. Often there is also a sense of completion or fulfillment and of warmth and love. Some people refer to it as a “God moment.” Usually, the unitive experience involves some change in awareness so that we might say that awareness is opened *radically*. All of the senses are acute.

Another fundamental characteristic of the unitive experience is that at the end of the experience there are sensations of wonder, awe, beauty, reverence, truth and “rightness. One is left with the feeling that what has just been experienced is the way things really are. But, after some time, the experience becomes fleeting and we are left with only the residue of memory.

Gerald May, a psychologist who writes on the contemplative life and on the connection between religion and psychology says in his book, Will and Spirit, that “unitive experiences seem to occur quite naturally within the lives of human beings regardless of age, culture, personality type or historical era (p.55, 56). His premise supports that of Christian Wiman, a contemporary writer and poet who went to Washington and Lee University and who now teaches religion and literature at Yale Divinity School. Wiman writes in his latest book, My Bright Abyss, that the “unitive experience” (my words not Wiman's, but the meaning translates), begins for many people, with an elusive experience of wonder and mystery. He says, “When I hear people say they have no religious impulse whatsoever ..... I always want to respond: Really? You have never felt overwhelmed by, and in some way inadequate to, an experience in your life, have never felt something in yourself staking a claim beyond yourself, some wordless mystery straining through word to reach you? *Never?*”

(From, “The Subtle Sensations of Faith,” Op-ed by David Brooks, in the New York Times on December 22, 2014.)

And, in an Op-Ed piece in the New York Times, titled “The Subtle Sensations of Faith,” David Brooks comments on Wiman's work stating that most believers seem to have had magical moments of wonder and consciousness, which suggest a dimension of existence beyond the everyday and that these glimmering experiences are the seeds of faith.

Brooks goes on to say that we use religion as the means of making these moments *part of our lives rather than* merely radical intrusions so foreign and perhaps even fearsome that we can't even acknowledge their existence afterward.”

So Brooks, Wiman and Gerald May are in agreement that these experiences of wonder and mystery that we call unitive or transcendent are natural to our human nature.

May goes even further to say that not only are they natural occurrences, but that **we are wired for such experience and that as humans we are born with a spiritual longing** that that has three basic dimensions: (May, Will and Spirit, pp.59-62)

1. A desire for unconditional love
2. A need for belonging and union
3. And a deep hunger to “just be,” or in other words to be loved for who we *are* rather than what we do.

Because of this natural human longing for love, we often begin an intentional search to find it. May tells us that that sometimes it is a *single memorable unitive experience* that prompts an individual to begin an

*intentional* spiritual search (May, p.71). Sometimes we search intentionally and at other times we may only have a vague sense that something is missing or that we are not content and we don't know why. We begin with stops and starts and circuitous routes to seek satisfaction, union, belonging and acceptance. Often we look to another person to satisfy what only God can give us.

Many begin the search at mid-life when the shift in us occurs when we realize there are as many years or more behind us as there are ahead of us. Richard Rohr, a Franciscan priest who writes about practices of contemplation and self emptying as a radical form of compassion, builds in part on the work of 20th century psychologist Carl Jung, when he says in his book, *Falling Upward*, that the first half of life is a building up of who we are; the goal of the first half is success. We are focused on our "doing," but at mid-life the journey turns inward where the task of the second half is to discover who we were created to be. The focus shifts to making meaning and is more about our "being" rather than our doing. The longing can no longer be satisfied by what we do or the roles we fill. We are wanting to be loved for who we are.

Let me list some examples from life that have often been described as having the qualities of a unitive or transcendent experience. Perhaps, you will recognize one as your own. Childbirth, a beautiful sunset, death, the reading of great poetry or literature, music, a vulnerable conversation, an illness, a meaningful coincidence, a job change, Eucharist, physical intimacy and emotional intimacy.

These experiences can awaken us in ways that lead to an inner truth or wisdom about the nature of God or of ourselves or the world we live in that sometimes can't be articulated or explained. It can cause us to say things like, I don't know how I know, or, I don't know what's different in me, but something is. Or, I have been changed, and I can't explain rationally what happened, or nothing will ever be the same, or I can no longer make sense of the world as I have known it before now.

Whether we've had a profound experience or a soft and simple experience of God, we have still been transformed in some way that gives us a new paradigm in which to make meaning. Often after an experience of, or with, the Holy, we come to a deeper understanding **OR**, a deeper confusion about God. The point is we are transformed in some way.

I'd like to pause for a moment and give you a few seconds to inwardly ponder an event or an experience in your life that may have launched you on a path of spiritual searching? (PAUSE – 30 sec)

Only thirty seconds of silence, but it can seem like a really long time in a room full of people. For some that is soothing and for others it is uncomfortable. Perhaps, like the experiences themselves.

There is no set way to determine or predict what experiences will be unitive or what experiences will give us a glimpse of the transcendent God, or what experiences will awaken us to a new way of being.

AND....

We cannot make them happen. They are given. Christian contemplative spirituality sees all unitive experiences as gifts from God, given through grace, and not the result of any doing on the part of any person (May, p.57).

Though we cannot make a "God experience" happen, we *can* be faithful to practices that foster and open us to the possibility of them. I'd like to name **four practices or ways of being that I have found helpful in fostering a receptive mode to experience more fully God's presence in our lives.**

1. The practice of being vulnerable
2. The practice of prayer
3. The practice of compassion
4. The practice of paying attention to the present moment.

Let's start with the **practice of vulnerability**. We are wired psychologically such that the ego is convinced that we have the final say of how our lives will unfold. When we fall into the false belief that we have everything under control, and we think that our ability to cope with things will ensure our security, we cut ourselves off from being vulnerable. Yet, it is only in claiming and living into our vulnerability that we have the opportunity to experience that there is something greater than ourselves that holds our lives together. This is what I believe Jesus meant when he said, "For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it" (Lk 9:24, Mt 16:25, Mk 8:35).

"Our efforts to stay in control are mostly driven by fear, and the very things we're so afraid to let anybody see in us, including ourselves, are the very things that deeply seen, and deeply accepted set us free from fear" (*Webcast of James Finley on "Merton as Guide to the Contemplative Life," sponsored by The Shalem Institute April 2015*). The bonds of slavery to the perceived notions of ourselves are broken when we claim our vulnerability. When we can name and claim our weaknesses and our insecurities, we are joined by God in learning how to love ourselves for who we are as flawed human beings. It is only to the extent that we can claim our vulnerability that we can discover our freedom. Or a more poetic way of saying it... "*The day came when the risk to remain tight in a bud was more painful than the risk it took to blossom*" (Anais Nin).

In addition to a willingness to be vulnerable, the **practice of prayer** can foster and open us to the possibility of a unitive experience. *When we pray*, we are *making known to God a desire to be in communion with God*. Prayer can take many forms, and we do not always need words to form our prayers, In fact, sometimes they get in the way. Sometimes, we need to be still and listen for the prayer that God brings to us. One of my favorite prayers to illustrate this is by Thomas Merton, a Trappist monk, who lived in a hermitage on the grounds of the Abby of Gethsemane in Kentucky.

Merton prays:

*My Lord God,*

*I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end.*

*Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so.*

*But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you, and I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing.*

*I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.*

*And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it.*

*Therefore, I will trust you always though I may seem to be lost in the shadow of death. I will not fear for you are ever with me and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.*

(Thomas Merton, Thoughts in Solitude).

I think what this prayer illustrates best is that our **desire** to be in relationship with God is what *God longs most for from us*. God's longing for us is what precipitates our longing for God, and we can name our desire for God through our prayers; spoken and unspoken. Sitting in silence with an intention to be present to God is as good as any eloquently spoken prayer.

The third way that fosters our ability to be in a receptive mode to experience God's deeper presence in our lives is through **the practice of compassion**. If we can focus on our heart space instead of our judgmental head space when we feel frustrated or angry with another, we can tap into the heart of God, which will help us to hold a person or situation in a love that is beyond our own. We connect our own hearts with the heart of God through compassion, so that we draw from a deeper well than we are capable of otherwise. The practice of compassion joins us with the human race in a way that makes us less competitive and more open to God's transforming power in our lives. One of the keys to being able to feel compassion for others lies in our ability to be compassionate toward ourselves. Some say that we can only accept and love others to the degree with which we are able to accept and love ourselves. Another way to put this is that we cannot fully love others until we have experienced our own belovedness from God.

There is a Raymond Carver poem called "Late Fragment" that speaks to this experience. Carver writes:

*And did you get what  
you wanted from this life, even so?  
I did.  
And what did you want?  
To call myself beloved, to feel myself beloved on the earth.*

These words hearken back to Gerald May's premise that we are wired for longing and that we seek in our deepest being.....

1. A desire for unconditional love
2. A need for belonging and union
3. And a deep hunger to "just be."

In addition to the **practice of being vulnerable**, the **practice of prayer** and the **practice of compassion**, the fourth way that we can be receptive to a unitive or transcendent experience of God's love is through the **practice of paying attention to the present moment**. Some call it the sacrament of the present moment. God's spirit is weaving in and through the world at every given moment and we have the opportunity at any given moment to become aware of this, but the only way we can recognize the in-breaking of the spirit into the temporal world is to pay attention to the present moment, to stop our multi-tasking and our planning for what is next on our to-do list and be present in the here and now to "what is."

**All four of these practices; vulnerability, prayer, compassion and paying attention to the present moment are ways that orient us toward a receptive posture of non-resistance for the possibility of a unitive experience with God.** God is closer to us than we are to ourselves. We are porous beings who live in the atmosphere that is God. We are like fish who live in the sea, and yet have no idea that they are immersed inwardly and outwardly in water. *In God we live and move and have our being*. The experiences are there waiting to be given to us.

Thomas Merton, said that God, the architect of our hearts made our hearts in such a way that nothing less than an infinite union with an infinite love will satisfy our hearts; that we are created with a longing for union with God in such a way that we live in restlessness.

We live with a spiritual longing that cannot be satisfied by anything other than a unitive experience of God, and even then, it is a fleeting glimpse, a soon to be remembered experience. It does not stay with us, though it changes us.

I am reminded of the famous passage from St. Augustine's Confessions in which Augustine states "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you."

James Finley is a former monk, who was a novice under the direction Merton while they were both at Gethsemane. He is now a practicing psychologist and retreat leader on the west Coast, and in a recent talk about Merton he names **three ways that we seek meaning that often result in a spontaneous, God given, unitive experience. Nature, Intimacy and Solitude.**

*(Webcast of James Finley on “Merton as Guide to the Contemplative Life,” sponsored by The Shalem Institute April 2015). (Three ways named by Finley...examples used, BBP)*

The first way he mentions is through **experiences in Nature:**

In nature, moments come to us, something is granted to us. A beautiful sunset, a gentle rain, a birds’ song....For me its a full moon over a high tide. Something changes inside of me when I experience that sight, something connective enables me to know that I am part of a larger something that I cannot name or understand. It is a transcendent moment, while at the same time I am fully rooted in the immediacy of the present moment. My smallness in the scheme of creation is accentuated, while at the same time, my belovedness as a child of creation, is made more known to me by the very fact that I am part of the picture, by no agency of my own other than drawing the first breath of my birth, and even that *was gift given.*

Wordsworth describes it so much better though! Listen to these opening lines from “Ode on Intimations of Immortality.”

*There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,  
The earth, and every common sight  
To me did seem  
Apparelled in celestial light,  
The glory and the freshness of a dream.*

What he is describing from his experience in nature is a unitive experience. The earth seemed appareled in celestial light.

In addition to experiences in nature, **a second way we seek meaning is through intimacy:** We can experience a sense of union with God through intimacy with another person. It can happen physically through a sexual encounter, or it can happen at an emotional level, without any physical contact. In each of these encounters there can be moments of oneness whereby we experience a sense of union with God that is beyond the experience with the other person. We may have a sense of God’s presence breaking into our being in a ways that we have not known before. At the same time there is the sense of two people experiencing themselves as one.

Listen to these descriptive words from Andrew Lloyd Weber’s “Love Changes Everything.”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gnLE0N87T6k>

*“Love changes everything  
Days are longer  
Words mean more  
Love, Love changes everything.  
Pain is deeper than before.”*

Through Weber’s words two of the characteristics of the unitive experience are illustrated. The first is that awareness is opened radically; Love Changes Everything!

The second is the description of the acuteness of the senses; “days are longer, words mean more, pain is deeper than before.”

When we fall in love with another person, we get a glimpse of what a unitive experience of God might be like. When we are “struck by love”---Love changes EVERYTHING.

**The third way that Finley says we seek meaning in addition to experiences in nature and through intimacy is through Solitude:** The experience of being one with God sometimes comes to us in solitude when we realize we are more alone than we ever thought we would be asked to be. This often happens when a *crisis occurs*, such as a death or divorce or at the end of a cherished friendship or a broken relationship with a child.

At other times, experiences of solitude are *entered into willingly*. A retreat, a long walk, a night spent outdoors under the stars....a quiet moment in an office that punctuates a busy day.

When we are in a place of real solitude, willingly or unwillingly, we are asked to cope with life without our addictive props or escape behaviors. We are invited to respond to the solitude with vulnerability.

**In addition** to these three ways that we **SEEK** meaning, there is also the common experience of meaning being **GIVEN** to us out of ordinary daily common events that come unexpectedly.....without any intentional seeking on our part.

A unitive or transcendent experience does not have to be earth shattering to shift our perspective or bring us to a closer awareness of God. It can often be a commonplace event that strikes us differently somehow in a given circumstance. Ordinary, everyday experiences can be *graced to us* in such a way that we see the extraordinary in them. I'd like to share a personal example to illustrate this.

In my work as a chaplain at Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport, better known as ATL, I have the opportunity and privilege to be engaged with all sorts of people, Christian and otherwise. There are three interfaith chapels at ATL, and often they are used by faithful Muslims who make their prayers five times a day. So, it is not unusual for me to see a Muslim man or woman in one of the chapels. It is actually quite commonplace. But one day in particular I had a transforming experience from the ordinary observation of a Muslim woman preparing to make her prayers at 3:00 p.m. in the chapel on the upper level of Concourse F. What was different this day is that while the woman was putting on her hijab (pronounced *he JOB*), her head covering, the Rev. Donna Mote, the Episcopal priest assigned to the airport by Bishop Wright, was simultaneously putting on her stole to set up the altar for our Episcopal communion service that also takes place at 3:00 p.m.

The visual experience of seeing these two women each robe themselves for worship literally and symbolically, struck me in a way that gave me a deeper understanding of God. I would say that I was “struck by love.” I had a sense of the oneness of the world and the people in it. I had a sense of changed awareness in my surrounding, and I had a sense of changed awareness of the varied ways we worship God that is reflective of God's broad and deep love for people of all faiths. I had an acute sense of wonder and of the “rightness” of the way the world could be. My heart seemed transformed in a way that grew me into a larger sense of God's love. It was an experience that took me beyond the bounds of my understanding of God in a deep and transforming way.

It's not that I didn't believe before that God equally and deeply loves seekers from all faith traditions, it is that the experience changed me to know it more deeply; *to know it beyond words*, may be the way to say it. I would call this seemingly on the surface, commonplace event, a unitive or transcendent experience. It was not an experience that I intended to make meaning of or sought out. It was given from ordinary, daily, Wednesday life at the airport.

In closing, I would like to share a question that Thomas Merton asked of himself (and, keep in mind that he was living in a hermitage)!

He asked, “Why do I spend so much of my life trapped on the outer circumference of the inner richness of the life I have been living?”

“Why do I spend so much of my life trapped on the outer circumference of the inner richness of the life I have been living?”

Isn't it so for all of us? We live on the outer circumference of our lives when there is deep within, a richness that God longs for us to know of. **The richness lies in the knowledge that we are beloved by God, that we belong to the heart of God, just as we are right now, in our imperfect and flawed humanity.** And we are invited to be open and receptive to the longing that God has planted in us, so that we might know of our belovedness through our transforming experiences of The Holy.

May we all be “Stuck by Love” as many times and more... than we can bear. Thanks be to God.

AMEN.

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